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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 000301

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SUBJECT: PANAMA ELECTIONS: FIRST DEBATE TURNS UP THE HEAT

REF: PANAMA 0145

1. THIS CABLE IS SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

SUMMARY: CANDIDATES BARE TEETH

2. (SBU) During Panama's February 2 nationwide televised presidential debate, the four candidates soon shelved their inhibitions and began attacking one another. Unemployment, corruption, and education figured prominently. Front-runner Martin Torrijos outpaced his opponents with such uncharacteristically reasoned, thoughtful responses in an impromptu setting, that opponents alleged he was given the questions beforehand. At pains to be polite, Guillermo Endara responded to questions with conviction, while shooting subtle barbs at his opponents, but lacked the spark that has set him apart from the others. Of the two stragglers in the polls, Ricardo Martinelli trumped Jose Miguel Aleman with a no-holds-barred frontal assault on Panama's incestuous political system. Aleman's responses were peppered with clumsy attempts to attack his opponents and seemed stiff and rehearsed. End Summary.

3. (SBU) Each candidate used different means to try to sell himself to the debate viewers. Martin repeatedly stressed that both Panama and the PRD "are different now." Responding to a question about his proposal to appoint a career police official to head the Panamanian National Police, Torrijos stated that Panama no longer has a military, so where's the problem? Martinelli insisted repeatedly that he does not represent the "traditional political parties that are responsible for the poverty, unemployment and corruption from which this country suffers." He stated that he would take "drastic measures" like reducing the tax on gasoline \$0.25/gallon to stimulate economic activity. Like Martinelli, Endara was willing to request that sitting Supreme Court Justices resign due to the perception that they are corrupt. Endara curried favor with anti-PRD voters when he quipped that "as the only 'guest' in Panama's jails among the four candidates" (during the Noriega dictatorship as a political prisoner), he was best qualified to know how to reform the judiciary.

METHOD TO THE MADNESS

4. (SBU) The debate format was based on 20 questions from the general public that a four-member committee pre-selected from an initial pool of approximately 200. The press conglomerate MEDCOM received the questions via telephone, internet, and personal interview with Panamanians who approached its affiliates. The candidates drew lots to determine their order of speaking and rotated who answered first. At the end of the debate, the moderators gave each candidate ninety seconds to offer final comments.

COMMENT: PERFORMANCE CRITIQUE

5. (SBU) Commentators generally concurred that Arnulfista Candidate Jose Miguel Aleman had made a poor showing, Torrijos' had won, and the other two candidates had turned in a reasonable performance. While repeating his "proposals for you" platform, which rarely responded to the question asked, Aleman launched personal attacks on Torrijos and Endara based on their past roles in government. Martinelli's pugnacious anti-system assault catered to viewers fed up with Panama's political cronyism, but observers questioned his moral authority in saying such things having worked in the previous two administrations. Despite being the firmest advocate of constitutional reform, Endara twice proposed measures that would violate the constitution. After Endara said he would appoint a new Panama Canal Administrator, Torrijos corrected him by explaining that only the Panama Canal Board of Directors has the authority to name or remove the Administrator. Endara later asserted that he would ask Supreme Court Justices for their resignation shortly after having complained about an overly powerful Executive branch.

These missteps reinforced the public perception of Endara as an honest, well-intentioned figure who too frequently gets the facts wrong.

BETTING ON THE PRESIDENTIAL HORSE RACE

16. (SBU) The morning before the debate, the El Panama America newspaper published a CID Gallup public opinion poll that ranked the four candidates as follows: Martin Torrijos - 42%, Guillermo Endara - 34%, Jose Miguel Aleman - 8%, and Ricardo Martinelli - 4%. Since June 2003, the gap between Torrijos and Endara has narrowed, while Aleman's popularity has doubled (though only to 8%), leaving Martinelli firmly in last place. Political insiders swear that the 67-year-old Endara's campaign will run out of gas, leaving the true competition between Torrijos and Aleman, who represent the country's two largest parties. Indeed, 60 of 130 Solidarity Party delegates walked out of the party's recent nominating convention after party managers told several Colon stalwarts to step down and make way for first VP candidate Guillermo Ford's picks, some say evidence of Endara's disintegrating backing outside Panama City. Considering that 30% of respondents said they would never vote for Aleman, Torrijos may not see Aleman as a real threat at present. Nevertheless, many seasoned political analysts assert that the Arnulfista party machine will deliver sufficient votes to overtake Endara and even narrow the gap to within five percentage points between Aleman and Torrijos. (See Septel.)

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